

# Demotivation in English Language Learning Contexts in Japan

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## Abstract

Teachers often contemplate and ask questions about what they can do to motivate learners. Their primary focus may be on matters related to lesson design, teaching methods and styles, or motivational strategies. It is also necessary and of considerable value to consider what should not be done or avoided in learning contexts, hence research studies on learner demotivation examine such an issue. An analysis and review of existing studies on demotivational factors among L2 learners in Japan reveal a range of pedagogical practices that demotivate learners. Awareness of these demotivational factors and influences can significantly assist educators in knowing what they can change within themselves and their classrooms to foster a better, more enriching educational experience for their learners. By following the pareto principle, educators can quickly identify teacher-orientated causes of demotivation in learners and effectively apply practical pedagogical solutions to improve upon these factors.

## Motivation and Demotivation

Research into L2 learning motivation has primarily focused on variables that motivate learners' choices, actions, and efforts. Although the terminology for "motivation", is generally understood in a broad sense, its actual range of reference is quite complex. As Dornyei and Ushioda (2011) suggested, the entire set of meanings that "motivation" encapsulates cannot simply be defined by a single theory, model, or a comprehensive account of all the main types of possible motives. In defining motivation, perhaps the only thing motivation researchers would agree on concerns the direction and magnitude of human behavior, stated by Dornyei and Ushioda (2011) as:

- The choice of a particular action (why people decide to do something)
- The persistence of it (how long people are willing to sustain the activity)
- The effort expended on it (how hard they are going to pursue it)

Many teachers are looking for the best ways to increase students' motivation through effective and motivational pedagogical strategies and practices. However, learner motivation may not always be due to what teachers do, but rather, what they choose not to do. The range of factors which may have negative effects on L2 learning motivation is known as demotivation in that its various influences diminish or cancel out pre-existing motivation. A "demotivated" learner was once motivated, but has lost their commitment and interest for whatever reason. Dornyei (2001) defined demotivation as "specific external forces that reduce or diminish the motivational basis of a behavioral intention or an ongoing action" (p.143). Demotivation does not mean that all the positive influences that originally built up the motivational basis have disappeared, but it is the resultant force that has been reduced by a strong negative factor; some remaining positive motives may still be operational (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011).

### **Studies on L2 Learning Demotivation**

A number of studies have investigated the demotivational factors L2 learners have encountered in their L2 classroom settings. In learning L2, a general pattern of demotivation among learners can arise as the initial novelty of learning a new language gradually decreases and increasing cognitive, linguistic, and curricular demands and social pressures set in (Dornyei & Ushioda, 2011). Chambers (1993), Oxford (1998), and Ushioda (1998) examined possible demotivating factors in L2 learning in their research and Table 1 provides a brief summary of these studies.

Table 1 *Summary of Demotivational Factors in L2 Learning, based on Dornyei & Ushioda (2011)*

Study	Participants	Method	Research Findings
Chambers (1993)	191 ninth grade British students	Open and closed-ended questionnaire	Students criticized their teachers for: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Rambling on continuously without realizing that students were confused</li> <li>• Not giving clear enough instructions</li> <li>• Using inferior equipment (for listening tasks)</li> <li>• Not explaining things sufficiently</li> <li>• Criticizing and shouting at students when they did not understand</li> <li>• Using outdated teaching materials</li> </ul>
Oxford (1998)	250 American high school and university students	Content analysis of written essays	Four general themes emerged: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Teacher's personal relationships with the students (displaying a lack of care, belligerence, criticism, and favoritism)</li> <li>• Teacher's attitudes toward course materials (displaying a lack of enthusiasm, disorganization, and closed-mindedness)</li> <li>• Style conflicts between teachers and students (differences regarding the amount of structure or detail required for tasks and the degree of seriousness of the class)</li> <li>• The nature of the classroom activities (consisting of irrelevance, overload, and repetitiveness)</li> </ul>
Ushioda (1998)	20 Irish college students studying French	Qualitative interviews	Students identified these demotivating factors: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Poor teaching methods</li> <li>• Insufficient learning tasks</li> </ul>

Dornyei (2001) conducted qualitative interviews with 50 demotivated (identified as such by their teachers and peers) Hungarian secondary school students regarding their negative L2 (English or German) learning experiences. Through data analysis following a stepwise theme-based content analytical procedure, he identified nine specific demotivating factors:

1. The teacher (personality, commitment, competence, teaching method)
2. Inadequate school facilities (group is too big or not the right level; frequent change of teachers)
3. Reduced self-confidence (experience of failure or lack of success)

4. Negative attitudes towards the L2
5. Compulsory nature of L2 study
6. Interference of another foreign language being studied
7. Negative attitudes towards L2 community
8. Attitudes of group members
9. Coursebook

The nine categories found by Dornyei (2001) accounted for a total of 75 corresponding occurrences in the interview transcripts (each negative influence was mentioned by at least two students as main sources of demotivation). The largest category directly concerning “the teacher” (with 40 percent of the total frequency of occurrences), emphasized the influential role teachers can have on demotivating their students. Dornyei’s (2001) findings also maintain consistency found within the research results reported by Chambers (1993), Oxford (1998), and Ushioda (1998).

### **Studies on L2 Learning Demotivation in the Japanese EFL Context**

Over the past two decades, the number of studies on L2 learning demotivation in Japan has gradually increased. Demotivation among Japanese learners of English has been a lingering concern among educators, administrators, and policy makers as recent educational reforms for elementary, junior, and high school levels place strict emphasis on the acquisition of all four of L2 skills (listening, speaking, reading, writing) (MEXT, 2016). Research studies on demotivation in L2 learning in Japan have mainly focused on learners from junior high school to university levels. Arai (2004) used open-response questionnaires with 33 university students and identified demotivational factors such as teachers, class characteristics, and class environment. Falout and Maruyama (2004) compared the differences in learner motivation between lower proficient (LP) and high proficient (HP) university students. They discovered that LP students tended to internalize demotivational causes whereas HP students demonstrated more control over their affective states by attributing demotivation to external learning contexts. Hasegawa (2004) examined 125 junior high school and 98 high school students’ English learning experiences with demotivation. She identified that negative experiences directly concerning teachers were most frequently cited as a demotivational source for students, concluding that inappropriate teacher behaviors can exert a “strong impact” on student demotivation (Hasegawa, 2004). Using an open-ended questionnaire based on Dornyei’s (2001) nine categories of

demotivation, Kikuchi (2009) found five key demotivating factors from a sample of 47 Japanese university students. The five demotivating factors were: teachers' behavior in the classroom, the use of the grammar-translation method, the presence of tests and university entrance examinations, a focus on memorizing vocabulary or reading passages, and dissatisfaction with the textbook or reference book. To further understand causes of learner demotivation, Kikuchi and Sakai (2009) asked 112 university students to reflect and report on their previous L2 English learning experiences in high school. They employed a 35-item questionnaire with questions involving learners' backgrounds, demotivating factors in their classes, and open-ended questions about their experiences of being motivated or demotivated. From the students' responses, the researchers isolated five factors: learning contents and materials, teachers' competence and teaching styles, inadequate school facilities, lack of intrinsic motivation, and test scores. Kikuchi (2013) provided a comprehensive summary of studies on L2 demotivational factors in various Japanese EFL learning contexts carried out by Arai (2004, 2005), Falout and Maruyama (2004), Falout, Elwood, and Hood (2009), Ikeno (2002), Kikuchi (2009), Kikuchi and Sakai (2009), Kojima (2004), Sakai and Kikuchi (2009), and Tsuchiya (2004, 2006) which reported the following six demotivational factors common in the aforementioned studies:

1. Teachers: Teachers' attitudes, competence, language proficiencies, personalities, and styles.
2. Characteristics of classes: Course contents and pace, focus on difficult grammar or vocabulary, monotonous and boring lessons, sense of being university entrance exam related and an emphasis on memorization.
3. Experiences of failure: Disappointment due to test scores, lack of acceptance by teachers and others, being unable to memorize vocabulary and idioms.
4. Class environment: Attitude of classmates, the compulsory nature of English study, friends' attitudes, inactive classes, inappropriate levels of lessons and inadequate use of school facilities such as not being able to use audio-visual materials.
5. Class materials: Unsuitable or uninteresting materials (e.g. too many reference books and/or handouts, textbook topics are old).
6. Lack of goals or interests: The perception that the English used at schools is not practical and unnecessary. Little admiration for English-speaking people.

### **Pedagogical Implications for Teachers and the Pareto Principle**

Taking the research findings into consideration, there are various demotivating practices and influences that teachers should avoid employing. Teachers play an essential role in the selection and performance of course contents, the pace of instruction, and shaping general attitudes towards L2. Moreover, teachers can sway the attitude of the group members and modify a student's own self confidence (Falout & Maruyama, 2004). In regards to some of the demotivational factors previously mentioned such as the compulsory nature of L2 study, negative attitudes towards English speakers, disappointment due to test scores, and university entrance exams, these represent macro or larger institutional issues that teachers may not be able to influence within their classrooms. Other demotivational factors such as uninteresting educational materials and classmate attitudes are highly variable amongst different educational settings and it is difficult to provide a specific solution pertaining to these factors. What remains is the most consistent factor of demotivation among L2 learners and that is the teachers themselves. In that regard, there are immediate pedagogical practices that teachers can incorporate and perform to curb demotivation; this can be done by following the Pareto Principle.

The Pareto Principle, named after economist Vilfredo Pareto, originated in microeconomic theory and permeated time management literature throughout the final quarter of the twentieth century, states that there is an inverse relationship to input and output. In the simplest terms, about 80 percent of the outputs come from 20 percent of inputs (Koch, 1998). A small percentage of tasks account for the majority of progress or the most success that we achieve comes from a minority of our actions. The key is to identify what areas can bring about significant change and focus one's efforts there. The Pareto Principle, also known as the 80/20 rule, has rarely been exclusively applied to altering demotivational factors in L2 learning environments.

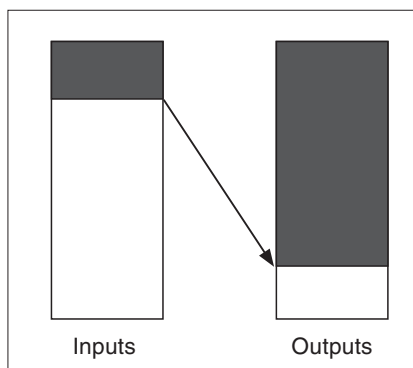


Figure 1 *The Pareto Principle: 80% of the outputs result from 20% of the inputs*

The Pareto Principle is an observation (not natural law) that most things in life are not evenly distributed. By loosely following the 80/20 guidelines, this can help teachers narrow down what specific pedagogical changes or strategies they need to focus on and utilize to prevent and decrease learner demotivation.

### **Teacher-Orientated Pedagogical Solutions to Reduce Demotivation**

According to the 80/20 rule, teachers need to filter out ineffective teaching practices and strategies according to their target learners. They need to identify and carry out motivational actions and activities, avoid demotivational practices, all within limited time, resources, and energy. Most students see demotivation as a teacher-owned, rather than student-owned problem (Christophel & Gorham, 1995), and teachers represent the strongest variable on each other internal and external demotivational factors (Falout & Maruyama, 2004). If students are demotivated by certain teacher behaviors, then it would be remiss of the teacher to ignore the effects of such behaviors. Table 2 provides a summary of learner comments selected from studies by Falout and Maruyama (2004), Hasegawa (2004), Kikuchi and Sakai (2009), and Hamada (2008, 2011). Utilizing the “Teachers” (teachers’ attitudes, competence, language proficiencies, personalities, and styles) demotivational factor derived from Kikuchi (2013), an analysis of relevant learner comments are as follows:

Table 2 *Learners' Comments Regarding Teachers as a Demotivational Factor*

Demotivational Factor: Teachers	Learners' Comments
Teachers' attitudes (towards the students)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Not motivated to teach while students were motivated to learn</li> <li>• Only kind to students who were good at English</li> <li>• Being critical to students' pronunciation while having poor pronunciation himself</li> <li>• Ignores students' questions</li> <li>• Teacher shouted at the students</li> <li>• Critical of students who could not answer questions</li> <li>• Responded to questions with ridicule and blame, remarking on the ignorance of the learner</li> </ul>
Teachers' competence and L2 proficiencies	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Unclear pronunciation</li> <li>• Teacher's speech was difficult to comprehend</li> <li>• Explanations were hard to understand</li> </ul>
Teachers' personalities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Talk too much about personal life and stories</li> <li>• Not cheerful</li> <li>• Speaks too quietly</li> <li>• Teacher speaks too fast</li> <li>• Writes too fast</li> <li>• The teacher got angry</li> <li>• Teacher is too emotional</li> <li>• General dislike of teacher's character</li> </ul>
Teachers' styles (teaching methods)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Lesson pace was too fast (or too slow)</li> <li>• Explanations are incomprehensible</li> <li>• Just followed the textbook</li> <li>• Unorganized and unprepared for lessons</li> <li>• Did not emphasize important points</li> <li>• Students did not get the chance to speak English</li> <li>• Class was focused on translating</li> <li>• Overemphasis on using English grammar correctly over practical usage</li> <li>• One-way teaching</li> <li>• Assigned tasks are boring</li> <li>• Assigned tasks are too difficult</li> </ul>



The learners' comments from these studies support the conclusion that many factors related to L2 learning demotivation are connected to the traditional, teacher-fronted classrooms where teachers act as an authoritarian, rather than serving as a learner-friendly facilitator. A lesson's pace and its basic principle or goal can be a demotivator when students doubt the comprehensibility and the effectiveness of the teacher's style and end up becoming demotivated and not making efforts to learn (Hasegawa, 2004). Concerning teachers' personalities, it is unavoidable and uncontrollable that some learners may have a natural disdain for certain teachers. Regardless of this, teachers must keep composure, not become overly emotional or get angry, orally communicate in a clear manner (audible voice control and volume), and possess a positive, rather than negative, overall disposition or nature. Teachers must also remember that each class has its own distinctive atmosphere and energy requiring a tailored set of teaching styles and strategies for what works and does not work in each class. From the viewpoint of group dynamics, a teacher has to serve as a leader, role model, and overall group facilitator by welcoming and responding to interactions, questions, and comments. Christophel and Gorham (1995) recommended the following simple, yet positive verbal behaviors: encouraging students to talk, having discussions based on points students raise, and asking students about how they feel regarding assignments and course procedures. Hasegawa (2004) also suggested using verbal immediacy behaviors (a perception of closeness between persons) by calling students by name, asking students about themselves, asking for students' opinions, and nonverbal behaviors (smiling at students, making eye contact, moving around the classroom, and using vocal variety), to positively impact students' learning and motivation. Teachers play a significant role in shaping and fostering students' motivation through their personal characteristics, verbal and non-verbal immediacy behavior, and active socializing (Dornyei, 2001).

Establishing clear objectives is essential for any class as learners without clear goals or convincing reasons can easily become demotivated (Dornyei, 2001). Brown and Lee (2015) highly recommended to make it clear to students what they are learning each lesson (e.g. "Today you will practice talking about your future goals or plans"). Educators need to make their classes interesting and engaging by being organized, incorporating novelty, variety, challenge, and appealing to student wants and interests (Nation, 2013). Make the classes relevant to the learners' needs by explaining why in-class activities are done and how it benefits them in real-world applications (Nation, 2013). Lastly, avoiding excessive time spent on translation, grammar, and other "busy

work” will help keep students motivated. As Brown and Lee (2015) stated, language acquisition is developmental and teachers should teach what is teachable at the right time with the four skills being integrated and treated as a whole language.

## **Conclusion**

Japanese students spend a considerable amount of time on L2 English studies throughout primary and secondary school education and it is in the best interests of both learners and educators to make the most out of this time. By reflecting upon and evaluating their existing attitudes, L2 proficiencies, personalities, and classroom teaching styles, teachers can quickly modify any of the features they consider to be negatively impacting learners’ motivation and potential. Dornyei and Ushioda (2011) also noted that demotivation is a salient phenomenon in L2 studies and that teachers and educational systems have a considerable responsibility in this regard. Being a good teacher requires self-awareness and the willingness to accept constructive criticism from internally and externally. Applying the 80/20 rule for teacher-orientated demotivational factors in L2 English learners can be an effective and efficient method for teachers to make changes within themselves and their classrooms for the sake of preventing or reducing learner demotivation.

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